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The True Cost of Gulf War Syndrome

Charles Krauthammer's column "What Gulf War Syndrome?" [op-ed, Dec. 20] seeks to debunk one allegation—that American troops were exposed to chemical or biological weapons—and to trivialize the scope of another—that the U.S. military was aware, prior to the gulf war, of the effect low-level chemical exposures could have on its troops. Krauthammer repeats the fiction that unless acute symptoms are visible, no damage has occurred. His blanket assertions do not stand up in the face of evidence already in the possession of the U.S. government.

Ample scientific evidence suggests, for example, that exposure to low levels of chemical nerve agents (or their cousins, organophosphate pesticides) can cause serious long-term health problems. More than 20 years ago, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute published a 47-page report detailing the chronic health problems associated with low-level exposures to such agents. The symptoms listed in the report are virtually identical to those being reported by more than 100,000 gulf war veterans.

The Defense Department has known for years that there were significant risks associated with chronic low-level exposures. In 1990 members of the U.S. 330th Ordnance Company, 59th Ordnance Brigade, in Germany—a repository location for more than 170,000 chemical nerve agent rounds—were required to sign a document that outlined the potential risk associated with low-level chemical exposure.

These risks, as detailed in the document, included memory loss, decreased alertness, decreased problem-solving ability and language problems—some of the core symptoms now being experienced by our veterans as a result of the allegedly nonexistent Gulf War Syndrome. After requiring the members of the 330th to sign these "information sheets," the Defense Department classified both the sheets and the medical records of the entire unit secret.

Taking Exception

Defense Department research into the effects of low-level exposure was conducted in 1991 at the Armstrong Laboratory at Brooks Air Force Base in Texas. The authors of the study explained that "[t]he military requirement that drove this program was concern about the bioeffects of single and repeated exposure to low levels of nerve agent."

The results of the study are all too familiar. Motor skill deficits and other cognitive problems appeared in primates after only one week of exposure to the nerve agent soman, which is known to be within Iraq's chemical weapons arsenal. The primates showed few if any of the classic symptoms associated with nerve agent poisoning, yet their motor functions were demonstrably degraded.

The key question yet to be answered is why, having suspected prior to the gulf war that there may be adverse affects to low-level exposures, the Defense Department took no action to further study the matter and seek to prepare a treatment.

As for the rate of illness among gulf war veterans, Krauthammer cites as support for his thesis a recent study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, which concluded that gulf war veterans were not dying or being hospitalized at unusual rates, at least through 1993. But he chose to ignore the Nov. 26, 1996, announcement of two studies by the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Navy that found gulf war veterans are suffering illnesses at up to nearly six times the rate of their non-Desert Storm counterparts.

Nor did he mention the announcement last month by Dr. Eula Bingham, chairwoman of the Department of Veterans Affairs' Persian Gulf Expert Scientific Committee, that gulf war veterans were clearly falling ill at unusually high rates, which might be explained by exposure to low levels of Iraqi chemical weapons and other agents. Finally, the low death rate of gulf war veterans clearly lacks any true significance. The passage of even five years after the war is unlikely to produce a high death rate based on low-level exposures.

Krauthammer's characterization of Desert Storm as a "clean" war with few "dramatic, conventional war-related casualties" can only be seen as a mockery of the sacrifice and daily agony suffered by tens of thousands of gulf war veterans and their families. Notwithstanding his conclusion, the cold reality of the gulf war should now be recognized. Based on the number of Americans who likely sustained prolonged low-level exposure to Iraqi chemical and perhaps novel biological weapons, far from the victory we still perceive to have occurred, the gulf war was in actuality a defeat, with a tremendous cost that the United States must soon come to acknowledge and bear.

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